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## **EU deal with Ukraine falters**

A SUMMIT intended to bring Ukraine into Europe's mainstream foundered yesterday after the EU said it would not sign a landmark political and trade deal until Kiev resolves the case of jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko.

Negotiations were finished on the agreement, which would create a free trade zone and establish deeper ties, but European Council president Herman Van Rompuy said signing and ratifying it "will depend on political circumstances".

"Our strong concern is primarily related to the risks of politically-motivated justice in Ukraine. The Tymoshenko trial is the most striking example," he told President Viktor Yanukovich.

The summit, four years in preparation, was intended to mark the start of a new strategic relationship between the EU and the ex-Soviet republic, which has made integration into the European mainstream a priority while managing strong ties with Russia.

But during two hours of face-to-face talks with Yanukovich, Van Rompuy and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso appeared to have made little headway in persuading him to relent and bring about the release of Tymoshenko and others.

Despite the setback, Yanukovich said Ukraine was still committed to European integration.

"The Association Agreement will be a key moment for the Euro-integrationist course of our state," he told the EU leaders.

With 45 million people, Ukraine is the most populous ex-Soviet state apart from Russia itself, and building a closer relationship is an important strategic goal for Brussels. The stalling of the pact is a setback for some Ukrainian businesses, which covet access to Western Europe's markets and investment.

Ukraine is also the main transit route for Russian natural gas into the EU, which relies on Moscow's energy resources.

Yanukovich said strengthening Europe's energy security remained an important part of Ukraine's cooperation with the EU and it would continue to modernise its gas transport system with the support of the EU and its financial institutions.

But efforts to bring Kiev closer to the European mainstream have been stalled since the sentencing of Tymoshenko in October.

An implacable foe of Yanukovich, she was sentenced to seven years in jail for abuse of office while she was prime minister. She called her trial a "lynching" by her adversary.

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